Elk Grove Unified School District's Arlene Hein Elementary: Homegrown Efforts Prefigure National Trends

While response to intervention, or RtI, first appeared in federal law in 2004, it was not a new concept. Researchers and educators both—and sometimes together—have been developing RtI models for over 15 years; and many teachers are calling it one of the most effective approaches to educating all students that schools have seen. RtI is not, however, a concept that fits easily into a nutshell. Any attempt to synopsize it suggests the educational equivalent of the plotline to The Marriage of Figaro: both involve many twists, turns, and variations—but, when executed with integrity, produce happy outcomes every time.

Here's one attempt at a large nutshell: RtI is the process of discovering what each student needs in order to learn—what instructional strategies work best. It incorporates research-based approaches, highly trained staff delivering the instruction, regular assessment, and the use of data derived from assessments, which then are used to determine the best instructional next-steps. RtI provides individualized education for all students, primarily in a general education setting. Most RtI models describe three or four tiers of intervention, with each consecutive tier offering an increasing intensity of supports. The first tier provides quality instruction to all students; the second tier offers various levels of intensive, targeted instruction as soon as students show the first sign of stumbling academically; and the third tier may incorporate an individualized education program (IEP) and may consist of special education services. An RtI approach gains a great deal of educational traction because of one key element: its core components eliminate the possibility of "curricular or instructional disability" being the cause of a child's failure to learn.

Severe Discrepancy Model

Across the educational landscape, interest in this approach is growing, in part because of its link to a significant change in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) that eliminated the requirement for schools to determine that a student show a "severe discrepancy" between intellectual ability and academic achievement in order to be identified as having a specific learning disability (SLD). Before this change, a student could not be identified as having an SLD unless a discrepancy was found in certain areas of performance: oral expression, listening comprehension, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, and mathematical calculation and reasoning. Under this model, students needed to fail for an extended period of time, sometimes years, before they qualified and received special education services.

As part of federal regulations for special education since 1977, this discrepancy requirement has been questioned for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it represents a model that has proven to be flawed. Much current research suggests that the longer a student fails, the slimmer the chances of recovering and resuming performance at grade level—certainly the slimmer the chances of ever exiting special education and claiming a place next to general education peers.

In addition, the discrepancy model does not address issues of culture, poverty, or language. A kindergartner might be three years behind age-mates in language abilities (pre-reading skills, for example) because the student's single parent works three jobs and doesn't have time to read;

because the parent cannot afford to have children's books in the house; or because the child lives in a household where English is never spoken. These conditions, while they do not preclude a learning disability, certainly do not create one.

In the face of this, RtI offers a clear benefit: it may be one sure way of determining whether or not a student does in fact have a learning disability and thus qualify for special education services—instead of just needing time and intense supports to catch up to age-mates because of experiential or cultural differences or inadequacies. Within an RtI approach, the decision to assess the child for a disability is not based on anyone's instinct or feeling, or even on a child's first performance. It is based on data gathered from regular assessments, which remove much of the guesswork around eligibility. Further, decisions are not made until the child is given consistent, targeted instruction over a period of time. And then, either a child is making sufficient progress on defined, measurable goals, or is not. If a student receives solid curriculum and proven instruction in a general education setting, and then given targeted instruction at increasingly intensive levels specifically geared to individual needs, and still makes no progress, then the child may in fact have a learning disability. And referring the student for special education evaluation becomes warranted.

Neverstreaming

Long before IDEA 2004, many educators around the country were puzzling over how to move away from the discrepancy model. Over 15 years ago in California, one school district in particular started laying its own groundwork for doing just that, and it hatched its own, homegrown version of RtI—inspired not by legal mandates or even research, but by the realities of its students.

Elk Grove Unified School District in southern Sacramento County is located in what was not long ago a sparsely populated, culturally homogeneous area of the state. But in the nineties, the district suddenly found itself in the middle of a population boom and thus faced the task of educating the hundreds of new students that this boom brought with it—students who spoke 80 different languages and who came from vastly different socioeconomic levels. This created daunting challenges, and the district didn't quite know what to do at first except try to find room for all of the new bodies—and survive.

To complicate matters, the population spike brought with it a dramatic increase in the number of students identified as having SLDs. While most districts have about 10 percent of their students identified with SLDs, Elk Grove was suddenly coming in at 16 percent. Pre-population boom, when students were not making academic progress, they were referred to special education. Immediately post-boom, this didn't change and is what accounted for the 16 percent. But the problem was not going to go away under the existing structure, and in many of the district's schools, the student support systems were cracking under the strain.

Beginning in the 1994–95 school year, a change took place: Elk Grove gathered 90 educational professionals who met for more than two years to develop an early intervention program for students with potential learning disabilities. This program, originally called Neverstreaming, was designed to "front-load" services as soon as students showed the first signs they might be

foundering academically. Neverstreaming, as the name implies, means never allowing a child to leave the advantage of the mainstream, the general education classroom. As Elk Grove shaped this approach, it included more intensive help than what was needed by most of the other students in general education, thus providing preventive services as soon as the need was detected. The main goal was to make sure that a student would never fall so far behind that catching up would be next to impossible.

Neverstreaming was a success, effective in breaking the "fail first" requirement that many educators believed was inadvertently established by the discrepancy model. The approach has evolved over the past decade, but it continues to use research-based instruc-tional approaches and assessments in the general education classroom, in combination with a commitment between both general and special educators to discover what strategies work best for each student—and to remediate at the first sign of trouble. Essentially, RtI.

Those schools in the Elk Grove district and elsewhere that are using an RtI model are living proof that there are many choices schools can offer before they have to consider special education. A concrete example in the Elk Grove district of how this works is Arlene Hein Elementary School (AHE).

RtI at Arlene Hein Elementary

One of the keys to the success of AHE's program is its Cooperative Conference, or Co-op, which regularly brings together general and special education staff to discuss the needs of all students. At this meeting staff determine the appropriate interventions and supports that will allow each student to succeed. The Co-op provides a forum for teachers to quickly identify those students who are struggling, as soon as their struggle begins.

"Our first level of response if a student is struggling," according to Carolyn Cook-Flores, Resource Specialist teacher at Arlene Hein, along with Resource Specialist Patti Teale, "is to meet with the teacher and talk about the evidence, about what is being done, about the resources that are available. This is where special education teachers are the primary support for the general education teachers. We help them figure out more intense and focused interventions that meet the specific need of the struggling child."

"If the teacher's efforts in the general classroom aren't enough for the student to make sufficient progress, then our Learning Center comes into play. This is our 'tier two' intervention, where students are grouped according to ability and given intensive, small-group help. While we have about 35 children (not including Speech/Language) with IEPs, we support an additional 45–50 students in the Learning Center. Many of these are students who will sooner or later go back into tier one, or the general ed. classroom and curriculum, and will never be placed on an IEP. We work very hard to get the students 'up and out'—up to speed on their skills and learning, and out of tier two and back to tier one."

AHE is one example of how RtI works; it also shows that it works. In general, the process has yielded improved school- wide academic performance, student progress toward standards and goals, and a heightened sense of staff collaboration. And, in contrast to the standard in most

schools of ten percent of students diagnosed with learning disabilities, Arlene Hein comes in at considerably less. While the school had the advantage of a built-in tiered model of instruction from its inception in the form of a Learning Center, the efficacy of its RtI approach continues to be evident: the number of children who are referred for special education services declines each year. There are additional benefits, many in terms of efficiency. "When we go for testing [for special education eligibility]," according to Cook-Flores, "we're 'pretty on' for who qualifies." And "many of our students get the same level of support, whether or not they have an IEP." The school's resources are available for everyone.

There are psychological advantages, as well. According to Cook-Flores, when a child starts to struggle, everyone gets nervous: the parent, the teacher, and the student. Once a child has been given targeted tier-two instruction in the Learning Center, "things cool off and slow down. Teachers are so happy that the child is getting extra help, and this makes students happy, too. They love to improve and see their own progress. It makes them feel good about themselves.

"We had one English Learner (EL) student who was having problems; we gave him Learning Center support and in one semester he made a 30-point improvement on the California Standard Test (CST). While he still wasn't quite up to Basic according to the ELA (English Language Arts) section of the CST, it demonstrated that this child was responding to the intervention.

"It's important to note that the child was still performing at the Below Basic level. We never promise that we can get a child on grade level; we just need to show that they are making gains. This is one of the many advantages of keeping and using data to make decisions about where to place kids and the kinds of supports to give them. He clearly wasn't learning disabled. He was learning like crazy with the right strategies."

Cook-Flores speaks with enthusiasm about the nearly magical change in attitude she sees when general education teachers embrace the school's full inclusion policy. In her experience, when teachers believe that the best—
or only—way to deal with struggling students is to refer them for assessment for special education, they end up with a kind of "pass-off" mentality. "When that's the school's pattern, there would be no reason for that teacher to do otherwise. It's only human nature to hold a temporary attitude toward someone who is not going to be around. But when you know that person is someone you will be working with for a long time, your attitude toward a problem immediately changes. You start getting very creative and committed about solving it."

Collaboration at the Core

The best news for everyone involved, particularly the student, is that no teacher is left to individual creativity. This is where the expertise of the special education staff becomes a significant benefit for everyone. "We're immediately there helping that teacher if the student isn't making progress; asking what has been done, what has been tried, what has been accomplished. And one of the greatest results of all of this is that the general education teachers, in the process, learn how to be better teachers." As Cook-Flores describes it, their arsenal of strategies, their ability to instruct, their instincts for what works just get bigger, better, and stronger. So they end up being more effective teachers for all students.

While, in its perfect incarnation, RtI efforts include mathematics as well as language skills, the primary focus at AHE is currently on reading—what Cook-Flores refers to as "the gateway" skill. In general, AHE's philosophy around both education and RtI is that any progress a student makes is worth a teacher's effort. And this belief, in her mind, makes a commitment to continuous student assessment all the more important. Data gathered from assessments are critical to demonstrating whether or not a student is progressing. "One challenge we face," according to Cook-Flores, "involves helping parents adjust to the time it takes to get students working at grade level. We celebrate all progress, and that's what we look for. We try to respect the unique gifts each student has and the unique challenges each faces. Change does not happen overnight."

Cook-Flores came from a Title I school that had a very different population and different hurdles—"more money," she acknowledged "because of its Title I status." She admits that having less money at AHE (not a Title I school) makes putting together an RtI model slightly more complicated. But, as in most RtI schools, "at Arlene Hein we make very creative use of all of our Instructional Assistants (IAs), well beyond their specific assignment. This is where special education supports contribute to the progress of all children, not just those in special education. The IAs are out there helping those who need it. And there is an amazing and admirable lack of territoriality among all of our teachers." She talks about the roles of each teacher and IA as having "fluid lines." "If I'm teaching three students with disabilities and other students without IEPs could benefit from my instruction, I include them."

According to Cook-Flores, "Our approach, call it RtI or what you will, is really about people rolling up their sleeves and working together to find and complement what works best for each child. It's about everyone taking responsibility."